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Secretary Jewell Announces New England Cottontail to be Excluded from Endangered Species List

Innovative conservation partnership saves rabbit that inspired “Peter Cottontail” from extinction, provides model for success through Endangered Species Act

DOVER, N.H. – Today, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell announced that a public-private partnership uniting foresters, farmers, birdwatchers, biologists, hunters and other conservationists has saved the New England cottontail from needing protection under the Endangered Species Act. The partnership has also initiated on-the-ground conservation efforts for the cottontail that will benefit the rabbit into the future.

Jewell was joined by U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe, U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service Chief Jason Weller, and other conservation partners at an event to celebrate the success of the multi-state effort.

“Thanks to the dedication of many partners, we can now say that future generations of Americans will know the cottontail – and not just through a character in children’s literature,” said Secretary Jewell. “This is a great Endangered Species Act success story of how proactive conservation across a landscape can benefit not only the cottontail, but other wildlife, and people who rely on healthy New England forests.”

The New England cottontail – the inspiration for author Thornton W. Burgess’s “The Adventures of Peter Cottontail” – is the only rabbit native to New England and east of the Hudson River in New York. The rabbit was classified as a candidate for Endangered Species Act protection beginning in 2006. Recognizing both the urgency and the opportunity to conserve the species, in 2008, state and federal biologists began a coordinated conservation effort that has fueled the species’ path to recovery. That effort

includes the development of a rangewide, science-based conservation strategy that has targeted ambitious but achievable goals.

Great strides have been made in making the strategy a success. Approximately 10,500 New England cottontails now live in a priority area, which brings the recovery effort three-quarters of the way towards the goal of 13,500 cottontails in healthy, young forest landscapes by 2030. Habitat projects are also producing increased numbers of cottontails.

“This initiative is a model for combining science, resources and public-private collaboration to advance the conservation of a species previously destined for federal protection,” said Service Director Dan Ashe. “This is a moment for us all to feel proud – proud of the partnerships we forged among state and federal governments, landowners, conservation organizations, tribes and businesses; and proud of the successes those efforts brought. It’s a terrific day for conservation and a terrific day for the New England cottontail.”

Voluntary restoration efforts on private lands played a critical role in increasing and connecting early successional habitat. In the past three years, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has worked with owners and managers of private lands to restore more than 4,400 acres of habitat by removing trees and invasive species, planting native shrubs and creating brush piles.

“The decision not to list the New England cottontail shows that wildlife and working lands cannot just coexist, but thrive, in harmony,” Weller said. “USDA is proud of the private landowners who stepped forward to make proactive conservation improvements on their land, restoring critical habitat for this unique rabbit.”

The Service’s decision makes use of a policy guiding the agency in evaluating ongoing or future conservation activities. The evaluation resulted in high certainty that the New England Cottontail Conservation Strategy would be carried out and would effectively recover the species – without the need for the formal protections of the Endangered Species Act.

The successful and ongoing conservation of the New England cottontail illustrates the flexibilities inherent in the Endangered Species Act, and the Service’s commitment to science-based, results-driven collaboration that engages landowners and other partners in voluntary conservation efforts.

“Restoring the habitat of the New England Cottontail has been a tremendous team effort,” Senator Shaheen said. “It serves as a good example of how development and conservation can make progress at the same time. Bringing back the cottontail population from the brink is not only important for New England’s heritage and ecosystem, but also for regional development that would have been adversely affected were the Cottontail to have been moved to the Endangered Species List.”

After the 1960s, the cottontail’s range shrank 86 percent as young forest habitat disappeared due to development. Remaining forests matured into older and taller woods that provide

little ground-level shelter and food for cottontails. Now, this once-common native species survives in five isolated populations across Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York and Rhode Island.

Captive rearing and release has also been critical to ensuring the rabbit's long-term survival. For the first time in history, more than 130 New England cottontails were successfully bred and raised in captivity in several locations.

“Our work is not finished,” said the Service’s Northeast Regional Director Wendi Weber. “We and our partners are committed to seeing this initiative through. We’re still seeking help from landowners willing to make and maintain young forest and shrubland habitat. In most places, this type of habitat will depend on our careful and ongoing management.”

The restoration effort has created and improved young forest habitat relied upon by at least 65 other species, including woodcock, bobcats, snowshoe hares, a broad range of songbirds, box turtles and frosted elfin butterflies. The initiative has united dozens of partners across the species’ range, from several state Audubon chapters to farmers and the National Wild Turkey Federation, all seeking to preserve open space, benefit native wildlife, and restore balance in New England’s forests.

The Endangered Species Act is one of the world’s most important and successful conservation laws. Since it was enacted by Congress in 1973, the ESA has prevented the extinction of more than 99 percent of the species it protects. Additionally, dozens of species have been delisted due to recovery, including the bald eagle, American alligator and peregrine falcon. Others, such as the whooping crane and the California condor, have been pulled back from the edge of extinction.

The decision will be published in the Federal Register on September 15, 2015.

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